GOD'S ONLY REQUIREMENT

July 7, 1991

8:30 and 11 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 4:16-21
Micah 6:6-8

"...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" --Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

It was a poignant occasion when Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first Afro-American to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States, announced his retirement two weeks ago. He was a reminder, a symbol of a difficult but important time in the history of the United States when the nation struggled with the notion and then ultimately decided that its national character had something to do with the prophet Micah - that all would have access to equal justice, equal opportunity, equal rights.

Thurgood Marshall was the attorney who successfully argued Brown vs. the Board of Education, the law suit which ended legal segregation in public education. The great-grandson of a slave, Marshall became, as a justice in the highest court of the land, the "voice of the voiceless," the Tribune said last week, "the one who spoke for the overlooked, the forgotten, the little person." [Chicago Tribune, 6/28/91] Tribune columnist, Clarence Page, wrote: "If the web of justice is a great national safety net, Marshall was its last remaining anchor at the end that sympathized most with people too powerless and causes too unpopular for politicians to touch." [6/30/91]

Marshall was a reminder, and not always a welcome one, that the driving vision behind the United States of America is a society unlike the world had seen before. A nation committed to both liberty and justice: a society in which freedom is honored but which assumes the responsibility to extend the benefits of freedom to all - even its weakest, least influential citizens.

Marshall was a reminder, not always welcome, of the high and holy aspirations expressed in the nation's birth 215 years ago this week; aspirations are Biblical hopes which are routed in Hebrew Scripture and celebrated in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The founders understood that they were creating something new. "A New Order for the Ages." It's on the dollar bill, by the way, just beneath the pyramid and the eye of God, an obscure Latin phrase, "Novus Order Seclorum," a new order for the ages.

They defined it eloquently in the Preamble to the Constitution:

> "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution."

A new order for the ages:

Unity

Justice

Tranquility

Defense

Common welfare

Liberty

It is a vision of a society remarkably similar to something a prophet of Israel said 2,700 years ago - "What does the Lord require but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

There is in the Bible a notion of how human life is to be lived in communities, societies, nations. That new order is to be kind, compassionate and scrupulously fair. It is to be particularly sensitive to the needs of the disadvantaged. It shows partiality to the poor and oppressed simply because they are poor and oppressed. Its definition of justice actually evolves from paying people back for their misdeeds, to paying attention to the needs of the least and the weak, those without a voice. Lewis Thomas somewhere wrote that any society should be judged on the basis of how it cares for and provides for its least capable citizens. The Biblical vision is a society in which justice requires that the least are cared for by all.

It really is quite remarkable and one of the consistent dynamics in the Bible is the way people are always forgetting about the creator's intent. Even when they are worshipping God, singing hymns, saying prayers and practicing their religion, they are inclined to forget what the real priorities are. And so, in order to keep them on track, to remind them of what God really wants, there are prophets in Israel. Prophets are truth-tellers. Prophets do not predict the future. Prophets don't reveal new truth. They simply remind people of truth they already know but try to forget. They hold people accountable to their own tradition.

So Micah asks: does God want fancy rituals and elaborate piety? Shall I come with burnt offerings - year old calves, or thousands of sheep, or ten thousand rivers of oil? The people know the answer to that. Micah knows they know. God has told you what is good, what is required - justice, kindness, humility.

And if the first thing the Bible says about the prophets is that people don't like to hear what they have to say, the second thing is that the politicians and the priests get angry and sometimes violent toward prophets.

One time, after the prophet Amos got off some great shots about God preferring justice in the marketplace to burnt offerings in church, the King's own chaplain pays him a visit and informs him that he is "persona non grata." "Go away," Amaziah tells Amos. "Do not prophecy here again, at the King's own temple."

Seven hundred and fifty years later Jesus of Nazareth was beginning his public ministry in his home town. He was at the synagogue on the Sabbath. His old friend and neighbors were there. "Isn't that Mary and Joseph's son?" they asked. It was a nice occasion and so they invited him to read from the book of the prophet Isaiah. And there it was again, the vision of a new order: good news to the poor. The spirit of the Lord is upon me. I have been anointed to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed.

The neighbors loved it. "Isn't it nice," they must have said. But then he put the scroll down and said "today this Scripture is fulfilled." That is, it's time to get on with God's agenda and for the poor actually to hear some good news, and the congregation turned into a mob and tried to throw him over a cliff.

My proposal is that there is a connection between that rich prophetic tradition in the Bible about a social order which is fair and just and compassionate and sensitive to its most needy citizens and the founding vision of this nation. It's not that we are a structurally "Christian nation." In fact, Gary Wills, in his fine book, Under God, Religion and American Politics, observes that people who talk about this being a Christian nation are usually about to do something anti-Semitic. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison had a radical notion of a society free from structural religious entanglement and an even more creative notion of religion free from governmental sponsorship. Gary Wills wrote, "No other government in history had launched itself without the help of officially recognized gods and their state-connected ministries." [p. 383]

Religion, in the new United States of America, would be free not only from official obstruction but from compromising favors. A burden was lifted from religion when it ceased to depend on the breath of princes.

Wills concludes that history has confirmed James Madison's radical notion that the unique vigor of religion in this land is due to its independence from state sponsorship. Jefferson, early on, was antagonistic toward traditional Christianity. He preferred the morality of Cicero and Epictetus. But later he began to appreciate the Biblical tradition more, precisely because the moral teaching of Jesus included duty to other, "charity toward neighbors, countrymen and the whole family of mankind." [p. 357]

And so when they founded a country they were captivated by a vision of freedom and justice, of liberty and kindness. And they wrote it into the founding documents. They had a notion that a government could exist for some purpose other than the protection of the privileged and the keeping of order. They dared to dream of a new order.

Emerson said the government, the state - in this nation - is simply our neighbors. The New England town, one of our first political inventions, always included a "green," grassy square in the center, which functioned as common property - but also symbolized a deeper sense of common responsibility, unity, common welfare and commitment to one another.

The risks, of course, in a free society are that in the name of individual freedom men and women will neglect the common welfare. It's exactly what Israel was always doing: forgetting about the poor, the sick, the blind, the outsider. Jesus spent most of his time ministering to precisely those people who were shut out from the mainstream of society: the common people, those too busy trying to find food to practice religion, the untouchable leper, the traitorous tax collector, the adulterous woman, the sick, the lame, the poor.

The vision of a new order characterized by freedom and justice for all is our glory and our vulnerability. In 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville worried about individual liberty deteriorating into selfishness. de Tocqueville wondered if people could remain compassionate if they were free. "No one can foretell," he wrote, "into what disgrace and wretchedness they would plunge themselves lest they should have to sacrifice something of their own well-being to the prosperity of their fellow citizens." [see Sydney Mead, The Lively Experiment, p. 85]

Those are strong words for a Frenchman to be writing about us 150 years ago. "Drive into New York from LaGuardia," Leslie Gelb wrote in the New York Times, "and gaze at the filth we have learned to live with." It was during Iraq's massacre of the Kurds and Gelb asked simply why all the crying about the helpless Kurds but no tears or dollars for crack babies, the hopeless, homeless poor - America's Kurds. "Don't tell me there is no money," he wrote.

Martin Marty recently cited an essay in The Nation, entitled: "We're Number One." We are first among industrialized nations in:

-the percentage of children living in poverty

-teen pregnancy

-murders of males between 15 and 24

-murders by handguns, all ages

-percent of our population incarcerated

"It would be nice," Marty quipped, "to be number two in some of these."

And James Reston, now eighty, retired executive editor of the New York Times, reflects in his memoir, which will be published in October, that renewing our covenant to public education is at least, if not more vital to our national interest, our national survival, than driving Iraq out of Kuwait.

To say nothing of the vision - the dream of a society which is free and just, and which makes a covenant to pay equal attention to common defense and something called the General Welfare.

We have convinced ourselves that governmental programs do not work, that whatever the General Welfare means, it does not mean something with an office in Washington or Springfield. "Privatization" of welfare and philanthropy have become important notions. But there is mounting evidence that it doesn't work either.

Robert Reich, professor of political economy at Harvard, has written a much discussed book that documents the widening economic gap in our nation between the top 20% and the rest of the population and what he calls the "seceding of the fortunate fifth from the nation." In terms reminiscent of de Tocqueville, Reich observes that the fortunate fifth withdraws support of public spaces and functions and redirects the savings to private services. As public parks deteriorate, private clubs proliferate. As municipalities cut back on maintenance and security services because their is no money, private security and maintenance systems blossom.

And the unkindest observation of all - because it addresses some of my own personal preferences - but perhaps the most prophetic: Professor Reich points out that when the President urges a 1,000 points of light in the private philanthropic sphere, the most capable of us respond by increasing our giving to art museums, symphony orchestras, ballet companies and elite universities... It doesn't trickle down. It trickles up.

What does the Lord require? What does God want of this richly blessed nation - this good land - this holy experiment? We know the answer. It's thousands of years old. God's only requirement is:

to do justice

to love kindness

and to walk humbly with God.

Thurgood Marshall put it this way in a speech years ago:

> "The whole thrust of the United States Constitution is people are people - strike them and they will cry; cut them and they will bleed; starve them and they will wither away and die. But treat them with respect and decency, give them equal access to the levers of power, attend to their aspirations and grievances, and they will flourish and grow..." [Chicago Tribune, 6/28/91]

The one we know as Lord and Savior almost got himself lynched before he really started his ministry of teaching and healing by reminding his own people of their best and holiest traditions. In that, he was a prophet. His followers, it has always seemed to me, are called to listen carefully, even when the words are painful, to prophetic voices. His followers are perhaps the best ones, perhaps the only ones in a society with the spiritual courage to remind the society of its covenant, its best and noblest vision of itself.

Jesus Christ, we believe and trust, was not only a prophet, but also a savior. Or perhaps, more accurately, he is savior because he is first a prophet. That is his love and care encompass the totality of our humanity, our personal spiritual pilgrimage and also our complex life in the world, our private prayers and our personal relationships, our salvation and also our citizenship... which is simply the way we live out our commitment to him in the world.

It is he, after all, who showed us what it means to be whole and human, what it means to be free. It is he who showed us that when we "gather at the river," we will be black and white and brown, and rich and poor, old and young, male and female. It is he who began with words which burn their way into our hearts.

> "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
> [Luke 4:18, 19]

And so for those of us who would be his men and women: the common life, the community, the body politic is, in fact, the arena in which we are called to be faithful. With fireworks and parades, we have remembered how it began.

May we not forget the vision. May we, in fact, quietly, but with high determination, renew the covenant, the terms of which were given long ago. "What does the Lord require?" - justice - kindness - humility. Amen.